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The Groundwork of
American Archaeology



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THE GROUNDWORK OF AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

BY

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THE GROUNDWORK OF AMERICAN ARCHEOLOGY

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In American Archeology man in the cultural process is the unit of investigation. This establishes the limits of the science. Its subject matter lies mainly in the prehistoric period, but this must be studied in the light of auxiliary sciences which have for their field of investigation the living people. It necessitates the study of all phenomena that will add to our knowledge of the intellectual attainments of the native American races or illustrate the evolution of their culture. It aims at a reconstruction and interpretation of the order of civilization existing in America before the Caucasian occupancy.

Nowhere had these races attained to the art of literary expression, though in Central America they were verging upon it. The record of their progress must be sought, first, in the remains of their material possessions; second, in survivals of their intellectual achievements written and unwritten, and, third, in the recorded observations of eye-witnesses to scenes and events of the historic period. Their arts afforded a means of lasting self-portraiture. These display the common abilities and common beliefs of the people and reflect the racial progress. They illustrate the gradual conquest of mind over natural forces and materials. Architectural and industrial remains illustrate the evolution of the social order. Sculptural and pictorial remains display the stages of development of the esthetic sense, and, through the symbolism in which they are expressed, embody the common conceptions of things spiritual, the early phases of the upreach of mind, the first efforts to enlist the aid of supernatural beings—in short, all the primitive methods of attacking the fundamental problems of existence. While entirely racial at this stage, results in individuation are foreshadowed. In primitive arts we have the mirror of the racial mind.

There are also recoverable remains of the intellectual possessions of the ancient Americans in the form of survivals of archaic cere-

monies, rituals, and traditions of living tribes. These are vital to the understanding of the life and history of the people, and because they reflect the inventional, esthetic, societary, and sophic processes through which the highest cultural achievements of the past were reached, they furnish keys to the interpretation of conventional modes of expression. For the same reasons it often becomes necessary to investigate the history and structure of languages among living tribes situated in such proximity to ancient cultures that historical relationships may be suspected. For information on questions of racial affinity, the aid of somatology may be invoked. However, our province is mainly the study of cultural phenomena and limits.

The history of any surviving group of native American people may be divided broadly into two epochs. The first represents a vast reach of time, during which the autochthonic character of the race was unfolded, a period of racial isolation, of unadulterated culture. The second begins when the group is touched by outside racial influences. This represents at most a period of four centuries, its beginning depending upon the time when Caucasian influence penetrated the group in question. Until the racial isolation was broken by the coming of the Spaniards, bringing in new industrial methods, new incitements to activity, and new ideals of achievement, the simple ethnic mind had not been an object of contemplation to itself. Unconscious of its limitations or of its status in culture, because ignorant of any other, its expressions in the form of arts, ceremonies, and symbolism were perfectly naïve. With the coming of the Spaniards a period of racial self-consciousness began. The simple process of unfoldment of culture gave place to the complex phenomena of ethnic mind acted upon for the first time by external stimuli of a most violent sort, and thus suddenly aroused to consciousness of its own operations and limitations. The quality of mind developed under such conditions is radically different from that developed under the influence of a definite natural environment only. There was immediate selection of esthetic, industrial, societary, and religious elements from the conquering race. Arts, industries, and social conditions underwent vital modifications. The ancient social and religious order was broken down and reorganized along new lines.

Ceremonies disintegrated with the passing of the clans in which they were developed. Primitive ritual took on numerous aspects of Christian worship which immediately resulted in the corruption of symbolism. The term acculturation, an adding to culture, describes the process that resulted in the present condition of the American aborigines.

The study of the phenomena of this epoch is more complex than that of the earlier period. The process of separating the recently acquired from autochthonous elements is laborious, and the chances of error numerous. Traditionary episodes, ceremonies, rituals, and symbolism must be subjected to critical analysis. However, there is a valuable residuum of facts of archaic culture resulting from the sifting.

The study of prehistoric archeology presents less complexity. Definite external surroundings give rise to definite efforts of the human mind to utilize, to overcome, and to account for them. The result is certain activities, the dynamic expression of the cultural process. The study of this process in the stage prior to the intrusion of any foreign elements, in the light of facts which ethnology lends to the interpretation of archaic phenomena, is a field comparatively free from the necessity of conjecture. The service which prehistoric archeology is capable of rendering to anthropology is comparable with that which paleontology renders to biology.

In the study of the historical development of the native American races, it becomes necessary to eradicate all political divisions and to find cultural limits instead. These coincide to some extent with natural boundaries giving rise to "culture areas." This term is used to designate a region in which some dominant type of cultural phenomena prevails to the subordination of all other types. Such an area is the so-called Pueblo region in the southwestern part of the United States. Numerous areas of this character are more or less clearly defined from Alaska to Central America.

All information that we possess at the present time tends to establish the fundamental unity of the American race and points to an evolution from lower to higher civilization. The time element in this process is by no means constant. The gap between the lowest and the highest ethnic groups might have been closed by a

generation or two of influence under favorable surroundings, or it might have required many centuries in the absence of such stimuli. In the flowing of populations that prevailed in prehistoric as in historic times, groups were segregated from parent stocks, carrying with them the ancient traditions, and as a result of isolation new and distinct seats of population arose, flourished, swarmed, and degenerated. While there were no means of storing up knowledge such as we possess, yet in the form of tradition it was transferred, replanted, and engrafted to such an extent that it may reasonably be doubted if any vital possession of the ancient races of America has passed into total oblivion.

It is necessary to investigate the fundamental causes of these specializations in culture, to ascertain and follow the direction of waves that flowed out to occupy new localities and influence other communities. The determination of affinities between widely separated regions requires long and laborious study of fixed remains in the field as well as of the movable antiquities to be found in the museums of the world, and together with the no less important investigation of the religious and social traditions which survived the shock of the conquest, calls for the correlated activities of many students and institutions.

Another important line of research in American Archeology is that of archive work. The records of those who had the opportunity to observe the native races at the beginning of the period of acculturation through contact with the intrusive race are of such a character as to be of great service. Voluminous as has been the publication of historical works on aboriginal America, there are yet archives of great extent in Mexico and Spain which have never passed under the eye of the historian. It cannot be doubted that much valuable material relating to the early historic period awaits discovery. The present time seems particularly opportune for undertaking the examination of the unpublished material in the Archives of the Indies and for the reëxamination of much that has been published in the past. In the early literature on America there is little that comes up to present-day standards of historical research. There is now great need for a reëxamination, in the light of present-day ethnological knowledge and by the critical methods

of modern historical research, of source material that has been much used in the past in historical and archeological interpretations. It is not sufficient that the archives be explored and unpublished documents correctly copied and given to the public. Discriminating analysis and critical comparison are necessary, if the truth about ancient America is ever to be recorded. It must be remembered that these are not the records of trained scholars seeking to make known actual facts. They are, on the contrary, the accounts of untrained observers biased by the excitement of conquest and moved to exaggeration by the desire to influence royal and ecclesiastical action at home.

The first task of the archeologist is to rescue the material and intellectual remains of the people whose history he is seeking to restore. It can never be hoped that a continuous record will be recovered, but the greater the amount of material secured the more nearly complete can it be made. But archeological research is more than the recovery and study of material. As history is not only a recital of events but an inquiry into their genesis, it is imperative to investigate and describe all phenomena upon which such events are conditioned. Therefore it is the belief of the writer that physiographic conditions are essentially correlative with facts of culture, that physical and psychic causes are to be held in the closest possible relation if we are to correctly interpret the intellectual remains of the native races of America, whether in the form of myth, ritual, and symbolism of plains and desert tribes, or in architectural, sculptural, pictorial, and glyphic remains of the Mexican and Central American civilizations.

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